

Double Edged Compliments

To many women, catcalling is just another part of everyday life. Because of the frequency it occurs at, we as a society have become desensitized to this form of verbal harassment. As a whole, we could benefit from a reminder of the true severity of catcalling and other forms of violent language. This paper examines the relationship between language and harassment to distinguish how violence can masquerade as a compliment. By looking at the way men and women use language differently, situations of catcalling, and the use of diminutives, we can better consider the impact language can have on victims and how this factors into the current social conversation in the form of the hashtag, #MeToo. By considering these examples, this essay will argue that in particular situations, compliments can be used as a form of verbal harassment and an assertion of dominance over the recipient.

Before getting any further into the discussion of language and harassment, it is important to explore the preexisting surrounding conversation. There are three main camps in this dialog, each taking a strong and differing stance. Firstly, there is the argument that people are simply too sensitive and need to learn to take a compliment or, at the very least, learn to ignore the words¹. The second stance is one that asserts that certain words and phrases are not appropriate in any situation and that violent words can be more damaging than violent actions². Lastly, a group attempts to hold middle ground, acknowledging that language can be a form of harassment and profoundly affect victims, but this harassment is situational rather than a constant³. I insert my

¹As represented by groups like Women Against Feminism, their beliefs are that women, specifically feminists, are prone to take offense to the majority of men's behaviors and actions (Women Against Feminism).

² There are many groups advocating for this stance and the complete termination of catcalls, including Stop Street Harassment and Hollaback! (Stop Street Harassment and Hollaback!)

³ Because it is not as strong of an opinion, there are few written articles from this perspective. Helena Bala from *Man Repeller*, does present her argument for this stance in her article "Some Catcalls Offend Me, Some Don't (and That's Okay)" (Bala).

argument parallel to the last group, arguing that verbal harassment is situational. Be as that may, I bring the argument into the current conversation by examining social movements such as #MeToo. I argue that it is important to acknowledge that while it is true that not everything is a personal attack, there must be an increased mindfulness of appropriate language usage in various settings. It's also important to address forms of harassment that are not verbal. Sexual harassment in the form of assault, rape and unwanted physical contact, especially against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) and minority communities is a significant issue. This paper does not wish to downplay the gravity of this subject. However, this paper will be focusing primarily on verbal harassment, more specifically, language and harassment.

To open the analysis, we must start by examining the difference in men and women's usage of language. The major differences are found in vocabulary and syntax. Women have a tendency to use adjectives more in their everyday speech, as well as more descriptive adjectives (Xia 1485). An example of this would be how women use adjectives such as fantastic, divine, or delicious to describe a meal whereas men more commonly would simply use good or great. Men are also more inclined to use swear words and commands in their daily speech. On the whole, women have a habit of considering others in their speech. When asking someone for help, a woman might ask "I was wondering if you could help me?" where a man generally would phrase it as "Please give me a hand." Both are polite, however the woman poses it as a question, more easily offering an opt out to the person they are asking (Xia 1486). These contrasts in language usage are mainly based on the way we expect women and men to behave. There is a cultural assumption that women are more polite and delicate, and because of this, society often teaches

women to shape their speech to model this belief. Society considers men to be tough and dominant, and pressures men to use their speech to emulate these traits. The fear of seeming “unmanly” or “too sensitive”⁴ is a large factor that steers men away from using descriptive words and compels them to use explicit vocabulary and pose questions as commands.

When more deeply exploring the relationship between language and harassment, catcalling demands to be brought to the forefront of the argument. But what exactly constitutes as catcalling? Olivia Farmer and Sara Smock Jordan, in their pilot study of street harassment, define it as “a type of sexual harassment that occurs in a public setting when the harasser is unknown to the recipient of harassment” (Farmer and Smock Jordan 2). This definition then, excludes cases of verbal harassment in a non-public space, which would therefore make catcalling situational. That is not to say that it's not longer verbal harassment if it takes place in a private space, it would just no longer be technically catcalling if it happened outside a public space. Catcalling is a serious issue that affects almost all women. In a study of 811 females, 99% of participants said they had experienced some form of street harassment (Street Harassment Studies). The goal of catcalling, or street harassment, is to gain the attention of the victim in a way that sexually objectifies them (Farmer and Smock Jordan 3). This objectification is a key component of street harassment. Victims are treated as objects that are open for sexual advancement rather than respected human beings (Davison, et. al 55). Groups such as Women Against Feminism would refute this claim, saying that most “catcalls” are simply friendly greetings such as “Hello there” or “Hello beautiful.” They, along with others, argue that women are sensitive and paranoid, and take these “compliments” negatively. What these critics fail to

⁴ In comparison with society's standards of hypermasculinity, which is commonly a factor of toxic masculinity.

see, however, is what's past the surface of these greetings. Catcalls must be examined while considering social norms and basics of human interaction (Bailey 355).

Let us now look at how a greeting may change with circumstances. For instance, had the greeting, "Hello beautiful," been said by someone with whom the recipient had a relationship with, whether familial, platonic, or romantic, it most likely would have been received positively. Between two individuals with a relationship, this use of language is a sign of affection. Even at a scene such as a party, the greeting most likely would have been shrugged off by the victim without a negative reaction because the situation is one where both parties are putting themselves in a social situation. Yet, as soon as the situation is no longer of a social nature, and there is no relationship between the participants, the greeting can create tension in the situation, while becoming fear-inducing to the recipient. Common American societal norms dictate that strangers do not greet each other in passing on a street, much less with an added compliment (Bailey 368). By breaking this norm, the greeting instantly becomes an intrusion. The added endearment transforms it into aggressive and unsolicited flirting. The endearment becomes aggressive because it is a presumption of familiarity by the user. It is an unsolicited burden on the other person, putting the recipient in an uncomfortable position. Other important circumstances to consider are time of day and whether the encounter took place between individuals or a group. For example street harassment is more likely to cause fear the later at night it takes place as compared with the afternoon. This is because typically at night there are less people out, so victims often feel as though there are less witnesses or people they can go to for help, should the situation escalate. Also, if the victim is alone and the harassment is coming from a group, the victim is likely to feel more fear than had the harasser been an individual. Similarly, when the

victim is with others, they are likely to feel less afraid than had they been alone. This is because there is power in groups. When the victim is faced with a group rather than an individual, they are at a greater disadvantage due to the disproportionate numbers. When the victim is with a group, not only are they at an advantage number-wise, but they have the sense of security of being surrounded by people who are familiar to them.

In terms of greeting strangers, “Hey/beautiful/cutie/sweetie” is more likely to be received negatively than a simply “Hey.” This is because of the use of endearments and diminutives. When an endearment or diminutive is used, the greeting assumes intimacy between the participants. In the case of street harassment, the interaction takes place between strangers where there is no intimacy present. Due to this circumstance, the greeting begins to become more than a simple compliment. Furthermore, use of an added diminutive is a power move by the perpetrator. A diminutive is defined as extremely or unusually small, or a smaller or shorter thing. Fittingly, when used in the setting of street harassment, diminutives make the victim feel small and powerless. This is exactly what the culprit wants. Diminutives are an easy way to establish dominance through language, and are subtle enough to be disguised as compliments. This makes them perfect for use in public spaces, where they can pass as a friendly gesture, and the victim is put in a position where taking offense to the diminutive seems rude and uncalled for.

It's important to realize though, that diminutives and endearments are situational. When used by a loved one rather than a stranger, diminutives may not be meant nor received as a belittlement. Likewise, when used by a female, even if she's a stranger, it may not be interpreted negatively. Touching back on the differences in the way men and women use language, women are more likely to use diminutives in their everyday speech (Xia 1486). This makes them more

natural and sincere in their usage than when used by men. This doesn't mean that women never use diminutives negatively. Women can also call another woman "sweetie" or "honey" and mean it in a belittling way⁵. Finally, the individual themselves are a large factor. Some people may take offense to any use of diminutives towards themselves while others are more tolerant of such language. Each situation is unique and can be influenced by the individual's personality, background, and previous experience.

"People just need to learn to ignore catcalling," "It's not that bad," and "If they don't take it seriously it will go away." These are the hasty generalizations of many critics, including writers at Women Against Feminism. The impact of catcalling is largely downplayed and underrepresented. Encounters with street harassments can have short as well as long term effects on the victims. Some short term effects can be trouble breathing, nausea, dizziness, and increased fear of bodily harm such as rape; experienced in the moment of the harassment (Tran 187). Long term effects can be emotional and psychological damage that lead to depression, anxiety, and self objectification (Fairchild and Rudman 342). Self objectification is when victims begin to see themselves as sex objects, which can lead to negative body image of oneself, which can further lead to anxiety and depression, creating an intense downward spiral of the victim's mental health. Victims will also avoid the place where the event took place or busy public places in general, indicating that street harassment impacts victims seriously enough to the extent where they will change their behavior to prevent such occurrences in the future (Batomski and Smith 84). More preventative measures taken by victims include altering the way they dress in public to hide their bodies and minimize the attention drawn to themselves and avoiding going out at night.

⁵ Women often use the term sweetie to be condescending in a subtle way. When one girl makes a statement such as, "Chad and I are very happy together," another girl may respond with "Oh, sweetie," in a patronizing tone to imply that the former is being delusional and overly optimistic about the state of her relationship.

However, studies show that none of these precautionary measures completely eliminated the possibility of being harassed, only reduced the likelihood and gave the victims a sense of having taken action to prevent being harassed, rather than the idle feeling of having done nothing at all (Dhillon and Bakaya 7).

In the conversation of language and harassment, it seems imperative to mention the social movements going on in the present day, or even since October 2017⁶. Many powerful men in politics and the entertainment industry are having their vile pasts catch up to them as their victims speak out. This often leads to the frequently asked question of “Why choose now to finally speak up?” The answer to this question is simple. With so many victims coming forward, others feel confident enough to share their stories as well, because they finally have a platform and have a sense that their stories are more likely to be believed. A prime example of this is the hashtag, #MeToo. This hashtag was started by actress Alyssa Milano to encourage women who had been sexually assaulted or harassed to either share their story or simply tweet the words #MeToo. After just 24 hours, a spokesperson from Twitter confirmed that the hashtag had been tweeted nearly half a million times. The movement continued to grow with men and popular actresses such as Rachel Wood and Gabrielle Union sharing their stories as well (Gilbert). Sexual assault and harassment had always been something that was kept private and never discussed, often because women fear they won’t be believed or, worse yet, the blame will be placed on them. This hashtag opened the floor for survivors to realize they were not alone, and give them the confidence to speak up. Antonia Eliason, Assistant professor at the UM School of Law, believes that the hashtag is a powerful way of bringing attention to the issue. She believes

⁶ See Appendix A.

that a large-scale movement such as this one has the capability to bring about a social change and may be the key to altering the dialog around men taking responsibility for their actions (Knef).

Of course, not everyone is on board with the hashtag. *The Age* writer Christine Flowers thinks the hashtag is toxic to victims and men. It groups soft harassment stories with intense abuse stories, which she believes takes away from the severity of the “real” stories. Flowers is also of the thought that the hashtag is too harsh on men. “More insidious is the way that men have been made to feel guilty, and then silenced, if they, too, suffered abuse,” she writes (Flowers 17). What Flowers fails to grasp is that the hashtag is not about proving who suffered the worst abuse, or blaming all men. As the saying goes, someone who drowned in five feet of water is just as dead as someone who drowned in fifty feet of water. Someone with a minor story of harassment is as justified as someone who was brutally assaulted. The hashtag is meant to support all victims and show just how frequently harassment and assault happens. The hashtag is also not meant to blame men and create a witch-hunt atmosphere. Men also use the hashtag to share their stories. In fact, actor Terry Crews shared his own story of sexual harassment through Twitter (Crews, Twitter [Moments]). The movement is inclusive of everyone, and the only people being blamed are the offenders in the victim's stories. Potentially, there needs to be a conversation about offenders who are also victims, which is a relatively common case. While this is not to be discarded, it is a conversation that brings up many moral questions and is best discussed as its own topic, rather than a side note in a paper about verbal harassment.

After considering the way men and women use language differently, situations in which catcalling might occur, and the use of diminutives, we can clearly see the impact language can have on victims, and how this has played a part in the growth of the the current social

conversation, in the form of the hashtag, #MeToo. By examining these examples, this essay concludes that in certain circumstances, compliments can be used as a form of verbal harassment and an assertion of dominance over the recipient.

Appendix A

October 5: Producer Harvey Weinstein is accused of rape and sexual assault and harassment.

October 6: Sr. V.P of Content for Defy Media Andy Signore is accused of sexual assault and harassment.

October 12: Head of Amazon Studios Roy Price is accused of sexual harassment.

October 15: Alyssa Milano sends out tweet calling on victims to use the hashtag, #MeToo.⁷

October 17: Creator and showrunner Chris Savino is accused of sexual harassment.

October 19: Editorial Director of Vox Media Lockhart Steele is accused of sexual harassment.
Tech blogger Robert Scoble is accused of sexual assault.

October 21: Chief Executive of the Besh REstaurant Group John Besh is accused of sexual harassment.

October 22: Director and writer James Toback is accused of sexual harassment.

October 23: Fashion photographer Terry Richardson is accused of sexual harassment.

October 24: Former *The New Republic* editor Leon Wieseltier is accused of sexual harassment.
Twitter confirms #MeToo has been used in over 1.7 million tweets and 85 countries

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October 25: Publisher of Artforum Knight Landesman is accused of sexual harassment.

October 26: E! News Correspondent Ken Baker is accused of sexual harassment.

NBC News and MSNBC contributor Mark Halperin is accused of sexual harassment.

Director Rick Najera is accused of sexual harassment.

⁷ See Alyssa Milano.

⁸ See Andrea Park.

October 29: Actor Kevin Spacey is accused of sexual assault and sexual misconduct with a minor.

October 30: President of *The New Republic* Hamilton Fish receives complaints from female employees.

October 31: Music Publicist Kirt Webster is accused of sexual assault and harassment.

Actor Andy Dick is accused of sexual harassment.

Head of NPR Michael Oreskes is accused of sexual harassment.

November 1: Kentucky speaker of the house Jeff Hoover is accused of sexual harassment.

Producer and director Brett Ratner is accused of sexual assault and harassment.

November 3: Co-Chief Executive of Primary Wave Entertainment David Guillod is accused of sexual assault.

November 7: Actor Ed Westwick is accused of raping two women.

November 8: Executive Director of the Armory Show art fair Benjamin Genocchio is accused of sexual harassment.

Actor Jeffrey Tambor is accused of sexual harassment.

November 9: Comedian and Producer Louis C.K. is accused of sexual misconduct.

Alabama judge and politician Roy Moore is accused of sexual misconduct.

November 10: D.C Comics Editor Eddie Berganza is accused of sexual harassment.

Producer Andrew Kreisberg is accused of sexual harassment.

November 13: Tesla and SpaceX board member Steve Jurvetson is accused of sexual misconduct.

November 16: Minnesota senator Al Franken is accused of sexual harassment.

November 20: TV Host Charlie Rose is accused of sexual harassment.

NY Times reporter Glenn Thrush is accused of sexually inappropriate behavior.

November 21: Head of Disney and Pixar Animation John Lasseter is accused of sexual harassment.⁹

December 6: TIME Magazine names “The Silence Breakers” as their 2017 Person of the Year.¹⁰

⁹ See Sarah Almukhtar.

¹⁰ See Eliana Dockterman.

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